

Thoughts Upon Waking Up in the Middle of the Night

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Friends:

I am awake at 03:35, and have been for about an hour and a half. One of those magnificent prairie thunderstorms has been tossing lightning at some of the trees along our East tree line and pelting the roof with small hail. I heard it coming as I slept in a sweltering 90-degree night. I don't like trying to sleep in that kind of environment for the same reason I don't go to fireworks displays—it takes me back.

Today is July 6th, that day in 1967 when a fat, DOD chartered World Airways 707 delivered me and the other 84 members of “Commander Brenneman’s Raiders” into the maw of Viet Nam. (We were 120 when we started training for river warfare) We literally hit the ground running. A squad of MPs had us taking the ladder three steps at a time, Navy to this building, Army to that building, and a few out-of-place Marines passing everyone in a power gallop to the closer of the two. They knew what those not-so-distant thumping noises were, and there was no way in hell they were going to be caught out in the open without a weapon on this auspicious day. Charlie was blowing us Reveille. A ground crew already had half of our seabags and duffle on a truck before most of us had stopped running. Someone in the building told us not to worry, that our bags would catch up to us in less than an hour. That was the first lie, and Commander Brenneman challenged it with a loud, profane, two-syllable explicative. I wouldn't see that essential piece of my gear again for 19 months. It would grow a thick internal slime and sprout a heavy coating of white mold during our enforced absence from one another.

We didn't know it at the time, but our little clump of bravado would never be whole again. Noses were counted, temporary berthing assigned, linens issued, and food delivered. We were confident of our skills and innocent of how swiftly the devil would demand his due. We numbered 83 by 18:00 the following day, 78 as August arrived.

I don't know how it is for others, but the humidity, heat, and approaching storms usually put me in a fantasy war setting. This time I was lying behind a clay mound with my crew. Transmogrified into human, Tank was to my left, unaware that he was quietly whimpering, and to his left was Mousse. The two of them were trying desperately to share a single skin. To my right, Tanner was somehow screwing himself into a hole half the size of a pound of butter. Tank said he didn't like the setup. Tanner agreed. We

heard shrapnel spanking the plants and mud around us as the rumble of mortar fire marched toward us. I told the others to keep their heads down just as a massive explosion ripped apart a tree 500 yards to our South. I gasped for air, terrified that I was choking to death.

Tank came to me, as he always does, and prodded me awake. I was in my own bed, almost half a century safe, but still choking—a benefit of being an old man with COPD. I grabbed some tissues, spat, arose from my sweat soaked sheets, and realized that my writhing once again had my broken ribs producing prodigious quantities of pain. Some hydrocodone accompanied by a glass of milk would clear away the pain, but I know that if I try to go back too soon the monsters will come again.

My weather station tells me an hour has passed since I began this note. It also says the temperature is down to a humane 67 degrees. I may as well stay up for a while longer and see if my obit is in yesterday's paper.

We're Commander Brenneman's Raiders—we're raiders from the night—we're dirty sons of bitches who'd rather f*** than fight! Wham! Bam! Thank you 'mam! Who the hell are we? We're Commander Brenneman's Raiders—we're raiders from the sea! (Our Company Jody)